

## Overcoming Temptation Genesis 39

On the heels of the series of bad decisions we saw Judah make last week in Genesis 38, we come to Genesis 39, and Moses as the narrator brings us back to Joseph, who is now in Egypt as a slave. It is not by coincidence that Moses inserted a cut-scene in the life of Joseph to detail the horrendous events leading to what was clearly a crisis moment in the life of his older brother Judah. He intentionally wanted us to see the juxtaposition between Judah's poor decision-making in the land of Canaan after he betrayed his brother and the good decision-making of Joseph, the betrayed, in the land of slavery, Egypt.

The contrast between these two brothers at this point in the narrative could not be starker. Last week, we witnessed the downward spiral of Judah due to his own foolish decisions until he hit rock bottom. Tonight, we will witness the downward trajectory of Joseph's life due to his own wise decisions. Wait, you say, "downward trajectory of Joseph's life?" Why would wise decisions lead someone's life in a downward trajectory? Shouldn't we expect to see Joseph rewarded for his faithfulness, integrity, and character, and Judah punished for his sinfulness?

We have titled this series "The Faithfulness of God" very intentionally. In order to understand the life of Joseph, you have to view it through the lenses of God's over-arching purpose. That is ultimately the lesson Joseph would learn, and which would enable him to become the man he became by the end of the story. The key passage in the whole Joseph narrative comes at the very end. We will get here eventually in our study, but until we do, I think it is helpful to have this end in view throughout the story. This is what he would say to his brothers at the end of the story when they came to him for forgiveness. Look at Genesis 50:20, **"<sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."** (Genesis 50:20) That verse tells us a great deal about how Joseph learned obedience through suffering. He was able to remain faithful through his afflictions because He knew God remained faithful through them. He was able to endure suffering faithfully because He trusted the providence of God.

I think the Heidelberg Catechism is actually very instructive here in helping us understand what is going on throughout the Joseph narrative. Question 27 in the Heidelberg Catechism asks,

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**Question: "What do you understand by the Providence of God?"**

**Answer: "Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, all things in fact come to us not by chance but from His Fatherly hand."**

Then, question 28 follows up,

Question: How does the knowledge of God's creation and Providence help us?

Answer: "We can be patient when things go against us; we can be thankful when things go well; and for the future, we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love. All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will, they can neither move nor be moved."

There you have it. That is a very helpful summary of the truth which held Joseph's soul in security throughout the most difficult days of his life.

As we open Genesis 39, remember what a terrible twist of fate had befallen Joseph last time we saw him at the end of Genesis 37. As a young man, just 17 years old, he was thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his own brothers. In one fell swoop, his brothers turned his dreams upside down. All the optimism and joy he felt as his father's favorite son, as the one who had received two dreams predicting that all his brothers would bow down before him, all that went out the window in the blink of an eye as his brothers betrayed him and sent him away muddy and empty-handed, stripped of his dignity and his robe of many colors, which was an emblem of his favored status in the family.

Imagine his emotions during his days-long journey down to Egypt. I'm not sure we can even fathom the depths of his heartache and sorrow. Imagine his anger at his brothers. Imagine his fears! "Where are they going to take me? What are they going to do to me? Are they going to kill me? Will I ever see my father again?" Imagine the jeering and laughter of the Ishmaelite slave traders who likely mocked his crying and pleas for release, treating him as less than human. Oh, what a roiling sea of turmoil his heart must have been within him during those days. How many tears he must have cried. But the Lord kept count of every one, as David discovered in Psalm 58:6,

You have kept count of my tossings;  
put my tears in your bottle.  
Are they not in your book?  
(Psalm 58:6)

Yes, the Lord knows your sorrows. He counts every one of them, and he feels them even more deeply than you do. He weeps and grieves over your sufferings, just as He did at Lazarus' tomb. As Joseph was carried away into exile, into slavery, into bondage in the land of Egypt, the Lord His God went with him. Which brings us to chapter 39. Let's pick up in verse 1.

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup>The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup>His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. <sup>4</sup>So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and

he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. <sup>5</sup> From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup> So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. (Genesis 39:1-6a)

First of all, mark this down, "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man." May we not miss the vital and vast importance of those simple words, "The Lord was with Joseph." If you hear nothing else tonight, hear this, if you want success in this life, seek the presence of the Lord. You have no good thing, nor can you do any good thing apart from this. Psalm 1 is a commentary of sorts on the blessed man who has the Lord with him.

Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.

<sup>3</sup> He is like a tree

planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.  
(Psalm 1:1-3)

That word "prosper" is the same Hebrew word translated as "successful" in Genesis 39:2. This prospering or success has nothing to do with outward circumstances. It literally means "to rush." How does a word which means rush carry the meaning of prosperity or success? It is connected to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Hebrew word for spirit literally means breath or wind, and when we delight ourselves in God and allow the Spirit to work in us as He wills, then we are said to prosper, or succeed, or even more literally, to rush. Look at this ship.



How does that ship rush along? How does it succeed? How does it prosper? When it allows the wind to carry it along. That ship was designed to be moved by the wind. We are designed to be moved by the Spirit of God. When those sails are set in the right direction to work with the wind, that ship prospers, but if the men on that ship tried to turn those sails to travel against the wind, it would not go so well. They would be driven away. That is how our relationship with God works. The Holy Spirit is always blowing like wind seeking to carry us along in the right direction for our lives. We don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes, but we simply set our sails to go with it by delighting ourselves in the law of the Lord. As the Holy Spirit, who is the wind of God, blows us along according to His will, we prosper, which simply means, to borrow the imagery of the tree in Psalm 1, we bear fruit.



See that tree, that tree is doing what it was made to do. Who designed that tree? Who put within that tree the ability to produce that fruit? Rhetorical question, right? We all know who determined what kind of fruit that tree could and should produce. God did. The same is true of human beings, made in His image. But the fruit we are made to bear is of another, a higher, nature than mere apples. It is spiritual fruit, the fruit of the Spirit of God. Paul takes up this theme at length at the end of Galatians, where he tells us what true human freedom looks like. Freedom in Christ means just this: walking in step with the Spirit and bearing fruit through His work within you. It is the fruit that comes from a living and abiding relationship with Him, through our living union with Jesus Christ. Jesus had already said the same thing in John 15 to His disciples on the night He was betrayed. As we abide in Christ the vine, we bear fruit as branches connected to His life-giving Spirit. It is the fruit of being made conformable to His image, just like He is. We are prospering, we are being made successful, when we bear the fruit of the Spirit. This has nothing to do whatsoever with our external circumstances. The poorest man on earth can be successful in this way, while the richest man can be completely cut off from this true success.

The Lord was with Joseph. That was everything! That was the only thing Joseph needed to prosper, and it is the only thing we need. One of my favorite passages in all the Scriptures is Amos 5, where the simplicity of this need comes out in full force. Look at Amos' admonition and warning there,

<sup>6</sup>Seek the Lord and live,  
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,  
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,  
(Amos 5:6)

Notice the reference to the house of Joseph. Interestingly, the same word that is translated “successful” and “prosper” is used in that phrase. It just doesn’t come out in the English, but it’s there in the Hebrew. It is the word translated “break out”. I think this is an ironic statement by Amos, who was speaking to a rebellious Israel. He is contrasting what happened to Joseph, who had the Lord with him, with what would happen to the house of Joseph, Israel, if the Lord was not with them. You see, either you will be rushed along on the wind of the Holy Spirit to prosper and succeed, bearing His fruit, or the Holy Spirit will rush upon you to devour like fire. Either the Lord is with you or He is not. If He is not, it is because you are resisting Him. You can go on your own way in what you think is your supposed “freedom,” choosing to go against the leading of the Holy Spirit, but you will find in the end that you were never free. When you resist the Spirit, you resist freedom. You are enslaved to your sin, you are enslaved to your father the devil, and you will find that the Spirit of God will rush like fire upon you to devour every last bit of the so-called life that you lived. All will be consumed in the judgment to come upon this world. You will never know the joy and peace that comes from having the Lord with you. You chose to strive against Him in the day of salvation rather than surrendering your will to His.

Do you want to live? Amos says, Seek the Lord. If you do not seek Him, you will not live. If you do, you will. Such simplicity. John says much the same thing in as many words in 1 John 5, **“<sup>12</sup> Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:12)** The life is in the Son, and the Son gives the Spirit. You have none of the Spirit of God within you if you do not seek the Lord, who is the Son. So again, I say, if you hear only one thing tonight, hear this, seek the Lord while there is still breath in your lungs, for without Him you have no life.

Joseph was living. He was thriving. He was flourishing in the house of Potiphar. He was a slave, but what a free slave he was! His master saw how everything Joseph did flowed from a pure heart and brought about good results for him. Joseph was obviously a hard worker, diligent in all that he set himself to do. Potiphar saw it. It was undeniable. What about you and me? When the world looks at us, what do they see? Can they tell that the Lord is with us? Do they see a people who are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? They will know us by our fruit.

Now, Joseph’s life will finally begin going how he dreamed it would, right? Not so fast. The Lord is not done teaching Joseph humility just yet. Joseph’s integrity and faithfulness did not ensure a life free from trouble and afflictions. Pick up at the end of verse 6.

**Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”<sup>10</sup> And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. (Genesis 39:6b-10)**



The one thing in Potiphar's house that had not been given to Joseph was Potiphar's wife. The enemy is crafty. He will use anything he can get a hold of to bring chaos and temptation into our lives. Potiphar's wife was a tool in the enemy's hands. She is the seductive woman we read of in Proverbs 7. Listen to how wisdom warns us there,

<sup>25</sup> Let not your heart turn aside to her ways;  
do not stray into her paths,

<sup>26</sup> for many a victim has she laid low,  
and all her slain are a mighty throng.

<sup>27</sup> Her house is the way to Sheol,  
going down to the chambers of death.

(Proverbs 7:25-27)

Joseph, amazingly, withstood the temptress from within her own house. He hadn't chosen to go into her house, but he found himself trapped there, with no way of escape. This really is a lose-lose situation for Joseph. Day after day, she threw herself at him, pleading with him to defile himself with her. How did Joseph stay above the fray? How could a man withstand such an onslaught of temptation? It really is an amazing display of faith under fire. We can learn a great deal from Joseph's response to the temptation.

Let's look at three ways that Joseph combats the temptations of Potiphar's wife. First, notice what he did not do. He gave no ground to rationalizations or minimizations. Here is how temptation first gains a foothold in our lives. The enemy always seeks to woo us with rationalizations. He lures us into the traps of justifying sin. Think of all the ways that Joseph could have rationalized giving in to Potiphar's wife. He could have justified it on account of his position in the household. He was in charge. Hadn't he earned the right to have this one fling, especially after all that he had been through. He could have reasoned that she wanted it. How wrong could it be if Potiphar's wife was so desirous of him.

Hollywood would likely portray the story in this way. They love to glorify forbidden love today. They would have us believe that true freedom and self-fulfillment is found in giving in to our basest desires. Just look at the list of nominees for best picture over the last several years, and you will see this as the recurring themes in the films of our days. The enemy is always seeking to entice us in this way, but Joseph gave him no ground. He did not minimize the sin.

Second, that leads us to what he did positively. He honestly faced the situation horizontally, in his relationship with Potiphar. Look at his words once more,

<sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. (Genesis 39:8-9a)

He acknowledged how this action would be a betrayal of Potiphar. It would be a heinous act of adultery. It's worth noting that all of these events took place before the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. The revelation of the evil of adultery was not news to the Israelites when God spoke the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment. It had been written on every human conscience since the fall, as it still is written on our consciences today. All the Law did was to officially codify what was already known and make all the people subject to its condemnation. It condemned our already guilty consciences. Yes, we are all hard-wired to know that adultery is evil because of what it does to our human relationships. It has terrible consequences. Joseph faced these facts honestly. He knew that he would be sinning against another human being by giving in to this temptation.

But Joseph didn't stop there. If you stop there, you will not find the strength to overcome temptation. If Joseph hadn't said what he said next, this is just me speculating, but I think he would have given in to this temptation. Third, and most importantly, he honestly faced the situation vertically, in connection with His relationship to God. **"How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9b)** That is the fear of the Lord in a nutshell. That is the beginning of wisdom. If you want wisdom, if you want the ability to overcome temptation, learn to see every action you take in this world as being subject to the judgment of God. Place every decision you make under the microscope of God's judgment. You will then begin to see how truly wicked sin is. Magnify your sin by seeing it as God sees it, rather than minimizing it by looking at it as a human being would look at it. Call it what it is, great wickedness. Make it known to the enemy that you see it for what it is, and it will lose its luster to you. It will no longer have the appeal it once had.

This is tied to the statement that the Lord was with Joseph. You see, Joseph did not see God as some distant, impersonal divine entity, whose judgment loomed somewhere out there in the far-off future. He knew that the Lord was with him, and that makes all the difference in the world. He was living by faith, which means he lived in the conscious awareness of God's nearness to him. When you live by faith, you are aware that you are walking with God, so He is not far off from you, but is dwelling right there with you everywhere you go. The thought of doing anything that grieves Him causes you to fear. You carry yourself with humility and reverence because you know God not only sees you, He walks beside you and even goes before you. As Christians, we know that He is even within us because Christ has cleansed us. To offend Him is to offend love. It is to break the heart of the One who loves you more than you can even imagine. The closer you feel to God, the more detestable sin will appear to you. Draw near to Him so that you can see sin for what it is, great wickedness. James captures this in very few words in James 4,

**<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:7-10)**



You see, as you draw near to God, and He draws near to you, you see how your sin causes you to be double-minded. It takes away your purity. It defiles you. It sets your affections on earthly things, and you can't have affections for both this world and God at the same time. In your nearness to Him, you are wretched and you mourn and weep. You don't laugh about sin, but you mourn over it and see it as the heinous thing that it is. If you want to overcome temptation, resist the devil, then you must draw near to the Lord.

What an example we have in Joseph! Truly, we ought to give thanks to the Lord for being with Joseph, and giving him the ability to overcome this temptation because it should give us all hope. If Joseph could do it, so can I! Joseph was a sinner just like me, and he overcame.

But the story doesn't end with his moral victory over sexual temptation. Ironically, Joseph's victory over temptation did not lead to his exaltation, but to his humiliation. Pick up in verse 11.

<sup>11</sup> But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, <sup>12</sup> she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. <sup>13</sup> And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. <sup>15</sup> And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." <sup>16</sup> Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."

<sup>19</sup> As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. <sup>20</sup> And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. <sup>21</sup> But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. <sup>22</sup> And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. <sup>23</sup> The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.  
(Genesis 39:11-23)

Joseph ends up being framed by Potiphar's wife for the very crime she sought to commit with him. The guilty party, not getting her way, decided to get her revenge against Joseph for his refusal to submit to her wishes. We should not be surprised by her treachery, should we, considering what we know of her character? Nonetheless, her actions are abominable. Joseph, for the second time in his short life, is now going to be stripped of his favored position, and sent down into the pit. Notice, also, that in both Genesis 37 and 39 Joseph is stripped of his garment, and then that garment is used to lie about what actually happened.

At this point, I wonder if Joseph did not face his greatest temptation of all, the temptation to despair. Remember he had two dreams of being exalted above his brothers in his youth, but instead, he has now been brought down into the lowest depths of the earth two times. It would be easy at this point to lose hope and to begin questioning or even accusing God. Why are you allowing this to happen to me, God? I did the right thing, and this is my reward? Is this how you repay righteousness?

But once again, Joseph overcame the temptation. It was the Lord who gave him the strength to hold onto hope in this desperate situation. **21 But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. (Genesis 39:21)** He did not despair because God was there. The same can be true for each of us. However desperate our circumstances, however great our afflictions, the Lord is with those who seek Him. He is faithful, just as Paul would later tell the Corinthians,

**13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)**

This was a terrible and trying circumstance, but it was not beyond Joseph's ability to endure it. You can rest assured that God will not tempt you beyond your ability either. You don't need to live in fear of something happening that will be too terrible for you. Trust that God's presence is enough for you whatever comes in this life.

I would be remiss if I ended tonight without mentioning another Man who overcame temptation. Joseph's faithfulness is encouraging, but there is another Man whose faithfulness is more than just encouraging, it is our salvation. When Joseph was tempted, he wisely fled. When Jesus was tempted, the devil fled. Jesus not only overcame temptation, He overcame the tempter. He overcame the one who had enslaved us. He overcame in such a way that our every failure is forgotten. Our every sin is washed away. His perfect obedience is our all-sufficient merit with the Father, so that we never need to live in fear of temptation. We can rest assured that even in the moments when we cave in to temptation, He will not forsake us. The Lord is with you, so you can become successful. You can prosper even in times of affliction. Never lose faith in the One who is faithful. Fear the Lord, O you, His saints, for those who fear Him have no lack! (Psalm 34:9)